

Trauma in the Workplace

What is Trauma and why is it stigmatized?

Trauma is a term used to describe the emotional response to a distressing or fear-inducing event. It can come from a single intense event, like a near death experience, or a prolonged and complex series of events such as abuse or neglect. There is no hard and fast rule for determining whether an experience is traumatic, and while stigma around the idea of trauma remains, acknowledging it is often the first step to healing. As educators, episodes of school violence, sexual harassment from co-workers, and other challenges present outside of your work environment can be traumatizing. The stigma surrounding trauma can make it difficult to reach out or ask for help. Victim blaming introduces fear and shame to an already difficult emotional experience. As a society we don't always know how to support people through difficult events. For example, people we care about might tell us to "just move on", "get over it", or "it's not as bad as it could have been", which can minimize and invalidate the very real pain and struggle of coping with trauma. We can also have our own negative judgments that can get in the way of healing, such as telling ourselves we shouldn't be feeling the way we are, or that other people have it worse.

Secondary Trauma: What is it and how is it different?

As educators, you may feel satisfaction from your student's growth and successes, but also empathise with their struggles as well. While a lot of attention is given to nurses, therapists and first responders to help them navigate and recognise the potential burnout and emotional pitfalls of the helping professions, as educators you are also on the front lines of interacting with our kids and assisting them through their daily challenges. Watching or listening to the traumatic experiences of others can lead to a phenomenon known as "secondary trauma" or "vicarious trauma", which can affect supporters and lead to mental health struggles.



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What are some of the symptoms of trauma?

Symptoms of both direct and secondary trauma can be acute and intense, such as a panic attacks or dissociation, and are often brought on by a trigger that places the person in a state of fight, flight or freeze. The brain can't tell the difference between real danger and imaged danger, and the person can feel like they are truly reliving the traumatic experience. Shortness of breath, a racing heart, flashbacks and nightmares are common symptoms, but each person may react differently.

Symptoms can become long-term and may impact your ability to work and get through the day. Similar to depression, one can lose interest in everyday activities, withdraw from loved ones, avoid situations or places that might be triggering, and feel an overwhelming sense of hopelessness. Trauma can also lead to states of hypervigilance. One can have trouble sleeping, difficulty concentrating and experience anger or anxiety. If the trauma is work related, it may be difficult to return to school every day and carry on as before.

What are some things I can do to cope, and when should I consider professional help?

Healing from trauma can be a long journey and can require a lot of emotional work. You should feel like you can reach out to a therapist or counsellor for any reason. Even if your symptoms are not debilitating, a therapist can be a great help in guiding you through the process of recovery. If you're having thoughts of self-harm, harming others or you're beginning to struggle with substance abuse, you should seek help right away.



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Some things that can help cope with trauma outside of therapy:

Build a Support Network: Reach out to other teachers and staff or join a support group. Perhaps there are changes that can be made within the school that can improve conditions for other staff who might be struggling. You can explore online resources if you're nervous about reaching out in person.

Find Healthy Coping Mechanisms: Exercise and yoga are a good suggestion, but don't be afraid to personalize this to what you find most soothing. Perhaps you enjoy quiet crafting while listening to music. Maybe hiking or socialising helps you feel connected. Try different things until you find something that works with your schedule and personality.

Make Time for Reflection: As educators, finding extra time for yourself may seem impossible, but even just an hour after work to decompress is a good place to start. Reflecting, as well as acknowledging and finding compassion for your emotions is an important part of healing.

Find a Way to Express your Distress: Expressing yourself through journaling, painting, music, carpentry, dance or any form of creativity, no matter how small, can be a helpful outlet.

Take a Break: Be honest with yourself if you need to take a leave from work, even just for a week. Sometimes we need more time to heal, and that can be hard to do while trying to fulfil all your regular obligations at the same time.



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Trauma can lead to a variety of distressing symptoms and can affect how we are able to function and perform at work and enjoy daily activities.

When supporting those who have been through a traumatic event, which can include secondary or vicarious trauma, it's important to assure the person that they are responding in a normal way to an abnormal situation, and that what happened was not their fault.

Healing from trauma can take time, and it's important to be patient and compassionate with yourself, and remember there are therapists available to help you navigate your recovery. Building a support network, finding healthy coping mechanisms, making time for reflection, finding a way to express your distress and taking breaks are good places to start.

